

My Online Self

Nick Messenger

Olympic College

Abstract

This paper will discuss various aspects of the digital world and how it is shaped in modern day society. Further discussed will be the ideas such as race and social class and how they can affect the digital world, how it affects behavior, and how people live within it. A separate section will be focused mainly on the title of this paper of “My Online Self” where my own habits of technology use as well as my own family will be analyzed in conjunction with the habits of society. This will be looked at and compared to various readings and resources found throughout my sociology course at Olympic College as well as my own outside findings. The overall intent of this paper and its discussions is to inform the reader of human interaction with technology. It also aims to show how it is affecting the people involved with it, and briefly discuss some insights into how behaviors and expectations will change or can possibly improve throughout time.

Characteristics of the Digital World

The digital world affects everyone in today's modern-day life, and the technology in the digital world affects each person differently. We each have our own habits, expectations, and views on our world. Our technology integrates and weaves itself into not only our ways of living, but sometimes even into our ways of thinking. Things like race, social class, and ethnicity play a role in the digital world and show that there are differences and similarities in how people think and act in the digital world.

With social media networks like Facebook becoming easily accessible for everyone and easy to keep up with, it helps bring out those who want to be heard. As Grasmuck et al. (2009) explain, "racial topics [are] moved from the shadows to center stage within online communities such as Usenet, a global electronic bulletin board devoted to topics or interests." This also applies to social media websites, for it gives anyone more confidence and ability to be heard. This is especially true for racial groups and more racial and religious topics online. People are becoming less worried to share their ideas and beliefs because of social media and the internet in general becoming more manageable and welcome to groups of similar people. With this, there has been research on how sharing and communicating through social media can differ across race as well. Zhou's (2015) study found the following with social media:

White respondents were most likely to have posted about events or entertainment, with 60 percent having done so. Black respondents, on the other hand, were most likely to have shared information about education or schools, at 67 percent. Hispanic respondents were most likely to have shared a post on crime or public safety, with 62 percent posting on this topic.

Not only does this show that there are slight differences in what is shared based on race, but it also shows that roughly 60 to 70 percent are actively sharing with others. Since social media websites allow for a welcoming environment where people can find their own groups and share with them, this data makes sense. This can also show how people of the same race connect even more with each other, even though it is not specifically discussed in the research.

But how do races see each other? While people post differently based on race, and communicate well with their own race, is this any different across race? This is a very good question for digital media and social media sites allow for even greater exposure to all types of people with their own preferences. One study on the dating site OkCupid, shows the relationships and preferences of each race on other races. In OkCupid's (2014) study from 2009-2014, they found that in 2009 "non-black men applied a penalty to black women, while black men showed little racial preference either way. [Also], all women preferred men of their own race, but they otherwise penalized both Asian and black men." Looking at this, we see that while race can affect personal preferences as well as the idea of homogamy, most people are more attracted to their own race over others. Looking at the data OkCupid provided for the following years shows that "OkCupid users are certainly no more open-minded than they used to be. If anything, racial bias has intensified a bit" (OkCupid 2014). The digital world brings us closer together and allows for easier connections with people who are very different than us, but despite this, the preferences of race have been barely changed, and in fact, intensified in some areas.

Not only does race affect sharing and friendships on social media, but so can other factors such as socioeconomic status. On Mashable, Fox (2012) analyzes research on socioeconomic status and Facebook friends and finds that:

Wealthier individuals tend to have larger and shallower networks of friends. After living in multiple places throughout their lives, these individuals tend to have different groups of friends. On the contrary, less well-off Facebook users have fewer friends because they tend to stay in the same place. Their groups are typically smaller and more intimate.

This shows that who we are and what kind of background we have, can affect the way we communicate and connect with others through digital media. As a person who uses Facebook and social media seldom, I find this research is fairly accurate, for I live in a small town where my small amount of my friends came from school, and they are very close friends of mine, even to this day. I do not necessarily see wealth as being the main concept behind these findings, rather, a combination of background, history, race, and one's beliefs.

It is interesting how well our characteristics of communication can play into our digital ways of communication. People's characteristics and ideas of race, homogamy, social class, and so forth, only seem to put a small dent in the way we communicate through the digital world, yet it can affect who we interact with, and how much interaction we have. Social media websites allow us to be a part of a group based on our own backgrounds, and is still open enough to allow us to meet others who are completely different than ourselves. Many can say that the digital world has allowed us to reach new levels of communication and integration into our social lives. But is this always a good thing?

How We Interact with the Digital World

With social media and digital communication becoming the main form of communication for people around the world, it brings changes to habit and interaction for both good and for worse. Social media can bring connectivity to groups of people, but it also can take over one's time and make them miss out on interaction and activities in the real world. In Modi and Gandhi's (2014)

study on the impact of Facebook on Indian youth, they found this exact finding. 58 percent of people in the study said they were missing out on reading. Another 48 percent said that they were missing out on academic study. Finally, another interesting finding was that about 40 percent claimed that they felt they were missing out on face-to-face interaction (Modi and Gandhi 2014). With these findings, it is safe to assume that most of this data can be translated across the world, and especially for the United States. The digital world helps us connect, but it also keeps us from physical connection, which could lead to possible feelings of sadness since humans are born to interact with others.

The digital world is an interesting place that has weaved its way into our thinking and everyday communication. An online identity could not be at its most truthful representation, for most people reflect who they want to be, or rather, a slightly improved self that is presentable to all. Zhao et al. (2008) find that their “initial findings from [their] investigation of Facebook were consistent with research on Internet dating sites in the sense that Facebook users also tend to present their hoped-for possible selves rather than their ‘true’ or hidden selves” (p. 163). Digital media plays into our self-esteem and has always had a big focus on “self” and presenting it properly. Facebook allows for easy editing of information such as favorite music, past work experience, relationship status, and much more. With this at one’s fingertips as well as the pressure society puts on social media and looks, many project an altered version of themselves. The amount of data one can share online is tremendous, and since it is easy to edit that information and since others can share a lot on the digital world, there can be great deal of pressure as to how much one should share. I find this very true for I have done the same thing. While I do not use social media as regularly as the majority of people, I still am concerned about how my profile looks to outsiders. I sometimes find myself accessing my own page from another computer or web browser to see

what others see. While the digital world is great for allowing a person to share themselves in a quick and easy way, it can allow people to become obsessed with their own self-image, which could lead to issues of self-esteem as well.

Everyone tends to have passions or even obsessions that they feel that they cannot express or share as easily. With the digital media and use of the internet, this is different. In Koughan and Rushkoff's (2014) Frontline documentary on generations and digital media, they find a regular YouTube poster named Tyler Oakley, obsessed with pop-culture, who has some great words to say on the subject. He explains that "if you were to go 'hog wild' about somebody or put One-Direction posters all over the wall, people might look at you weird. But on the internet, people are all about it" (Koughan, Rushkoff 2014). This shows that the way we see people through the internet can be different. It adds this soft barrier that protects us from direct interaction, and allows for people to fully come out and express themselves. With this, big business is always looking for ways to get people to be all about something. The things people like, typically become a part of who they are and are even deeper-rooted depending on how passionate they are about these specific things. Big businesses and modern-day media are ever-changing with society to get engagement of customers and consumers. These companies need to change with generations, for communication and exposure to ads and media has changed over time.

Addiction comes in many forms, and social and digital media are one of them. As explained earlier, social media can keep people from doing physical activities and having face-to-face interaction with others. It can also become an addiction and keep people regularly checking their digital media, distancing themselves from the real world. Modi and Gandhi (2014) also focus on this in their research on Indian youth where they found the following: "According to the addiction score distribution, it was observed that 18% of the sample had above average addiction (14% high

addiction and 4% very high addiction) while 15% had below average addiction score” (p. 2). Of course, once again, this data only represents Indian youth, but it can be looked at and analyzed in general for the bigger-picture. This data shows that almost a quarter of the people in the study had a high addiction or very high addiction. The need to share can be very high for some and affects people differently. For example, my mother has a high usage of Facebook, for I regularly see posts from her and she is regularly on her phone. I on the other hand, am barely on Facebook and only go on to use the messenger app with friends or to see recent posts. My sister is in the middle-of-the road when it comes to regular use. But is this really addiction? I would say no. Usage of social media in general can be a great tool for entertainment and communication, but with anything, too much of it can be an issue. With my family, despite my mom using Facebook the most regularly, it is not an addiction. The reason why is because it has not affected her regular life outside of digital media. Addiction only really occurs when the digital media takes over and affects your regular every-day communication and life. If digital media usage makes you miss out on physical things you like to do in life, it could be an addiction. Though digital media and the real world have distinctions, they also connect.

Conclusions

The digital world is one that has existed for a long time, and continues to reveal itself and blend more with our regular lives each day. What was once a solid wall between the two is now a gray area that allows both to work and blend together. Zhao et al. (2008) explain the digital world and how it integrates into the idea of self and the physical world:

Identity is not an individual characteristic; it is not an expression of something innate in a person, it is rather a social product, the outcome of a given social environment and hence performed differently in varying contexts. Depending on the characteristics of the

environment in which they find themselves, individuals will choose to claim identities that can help them better situate within the given social environment. (p. 1831).

This idea of “choosing” who you are in a given context applies to the physical world but especially so for the digital world because of how easy it is to change details and information on the internet. We put on different “acts” in varying situations, specifically on the internet with our online profiles and who we communicate with. Our habits also change with the digital world, for we may have addiction to the sites and services we use, prioritize physical interaction or digital interaction, and possibly miss out on the things we like to do most because of the digital world. Even things like race and one’s background and socioeconomic status can influence communication and how one interprets and interacts with the digital world. Yet our human interaction and preferences are rarely affected, but rather, tinted or hidden in some areas and revealed in others. There is a fine balance with technology and the digital world and our integration and use of it. Too much, and we tend to lose our “humanity”, but too little, and we seem to be “old-fashioned” and out of the loop of ever-changing and rapidly accessible information in today’s media. How people view each other is different now more than ever, since there are even more perspectives to consider, especially considering one person can have a digital perspective as well as a physical one. As Zhou et al. (2008) greatly put it: “In the Internet era, the social world includes both the online and offline environments, and an important skill people need to learn is how to coordinate their behaviors in these two realms” (p. 1831). The digital world and our interaction with it is constantly shifting. Taking a step back and looking at it from an outside point of view can reveal a lot, but it is still hard to predict at times. It makes you wonder what the future will look like.

References

- Fox, Z. (n.d.). Socioeconomic Status Predicts Number of Facebook Friends. Retrieved November 1, 2017, from <http://mashable.com/2012/12/20/facebook-socioeconomics/>
- Grasmuck, S., Martin, J., & Zhao, S. (2009). Ethno-Racial Identity Displays on Facebook. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 15*(1), 158–188. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2009.01498.x>
- Koughan, F., & Rushkoff, D. (2014, February 18). Generation Like. Retrieved November 2, 2017, from <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/generation-like/>
- Modi, Y. A., & Gandhi, I. S. (2014). Internet sociology: Impact of Facebook addiction on the lifestyle and other recreational activities of the Indian youth. *SHS Web of Conferences, 5*, 00001. <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20140500001>
- OkCupid. (2014, September 10). Race and Attraction, 2009–2014. Retrieved November 2, 2017, from <https://theblog.okcupid.com/race-and-attraction-2009-2014-107dccb4f060>
- Zhao, S., Grasmuck, S., & Martin, J. (2008). Identity construction on Facebook: Digital empowerment in anchored relationships. *Computers in Human Behavior, 24*(5), 1816–1836. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2008.02.012>
- Zhou, L. (n.d.). When It Comes to Sharing on Social Media, Conversations Differs By Race - The Atlantic. Retrieved November 1, 2017, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/10/race-social-media/408889/>